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Between Meaning and Magic – Petroglyphs!



"Honu" is Hawaiian for turtle

Petroglyphs (petros = rock; glyph = carving) are man-made images that were pecked, scratched, incised, or abraded into stone. They date back thousands of years and are found all over the world. Petroglyphs were used by early man to record events and visions, and for story telling. They were produced using crude tools such as sticks, rocks, or bones. Such pictures convey ideas or meaning to the mind without the use of words, sounds, or other language forms. This primitive means of communication, known as pictography (picture-writing), forms the basis of the Chinese and Japanese characters used today. Like ancient Indians north of the Rio Grande, *kanaka maoli* of old had no written language. They sustained traditions and told stories by passing them down by word of mouth. Petroglyphs were helpful in aiding memory and communicating ideas from one generation to the next.

Hawaiian petroglyphs have a common character and occasional similarities to those found elsewhere, especially in Europe, North and South America, and India. Petroglyph sites here are widespread, and have been reported on all of our major islands. Most sites, about 70, are on the Big Island of Hawaii, which had the greatest population in the late 1700s. Other sites are on Lanai (23), Maui (18), Oahu (9), Kauai (9), Molokai (5), and Niihau (1). Petroglyphs have more recently been found on Kahoolawe. Hawaiian petroglyphs are most often clustered in groups, rather than as isolated units. Many are at *wahi pana* (storied places), at boundaries, along trails, and in caves. They commemorated events, marked boundaries, kept records, and depicted man's interaction with the gods including 'aumakua (ancestral guardian gods) and 'unihipili (another class of protective spirits). Cupules were also carved in rock for placement of the *piko* (umbilical cord stump) after childbirth.

Petroglyphs in Hawaii are most often found on five types of surfaces: *pahoehoe* (most on the Big Island), waterworn boulders (many on Lanai), cliff faces (most Maui sites), cave walls (lava tubes especially on the Big Island), and beach shelves (some Kauai and Oahu sites). Subjects of most petroglyphs are people, dots and circles of varying significance, and a few man-made objects and animals important to Hawaiians. Families, birth scenes, means of transportation (such as canoes, paddles, sails, and men marching),

and supernatural beings often are readily identifiable. Surprisingly, other than a few turtles, crabs, and some other marine animals, there is relative paucity in our petroglyphs of sea life, and also of birds and houses.

Hawaiian petroglyphs may date from the first arrivals here some 1,200 years ago. Many appear to have been inscribed in the immediate Pre-Discovery Period, before 1778, when Captain James Cook's arrival at Kealahou Bay at *makahiki* was interpreted by *kanaka maoli* as the return of *Lono*, god of rain, thunder, agriculture, and fertility. Some petroglyphs depict the horses and guns introduced to the Kingdom by *haole* in 1798. Petroglyph activity virtually ceased by the 1860s, in conjunction with codification into writing of the Hawaiian language, ascendancy of Christianity over Hawaiian pantheism, and accelerating dissolution of Hawaiian culture.

Excellent accounts^{1,2} detail the story of petroglyphs in Hawaii.

The panoply of Hawaiian petroglyphs is well represented by illustrations in the collection of Merle Setser, Ph.D., Research Analyst, Honolulu Police Department, and maven of Hawaiian rock carvings. The *Journal* will, from time to time, print images from her collection in our pages. These will complement our cover art by the talented Dietrich Varez, and serve as a reminder that we are the *Hawaii Medical Journal*. Mahalo, Merle, for sharing!

References

1. Cox JH, with Stasack E: *Hawaiian Petroglyphs*, Honolulu, Bishop Museum Press, 1988, Fifth Printing, 100 pages.
2. Lee G, Stasack E: *Spirit of Place: Petroglyphs of Hawai'i*. Honolulu, Easter Island Foundation, 1999, 211 pages.